

# Aeneas and the (eleph)ants

Emily Gowers

In 1974 a well-known scholar published a book called *The Elephant in the Greek and Roman World*. Not surprisingly, there is no equivalent leathery volume on the elephant's tiny co-star in fables and joke-books, the ant. So here's a start at redressing the balance: a microscopic look at some ants in Latin poetry. Perhaps the most famous sighting of ants is in Virgil's *Aeneid* 4, at the moment when queen Dido looks down from a watch-tower at Carthage and sees her lover Aeneas and his Trojans leaving by stealth, like a black column of ants foraging for the winter:

*Just as when ants plunder a huge pile of grain, with an eye on the winter, and store it at home: along plods the black line across the fields, bearing the loot through the undergrowth in narrow file. Some push the large grains, shoving with their shoulders; others control the lines and chivvy slackers; the whole route steams with activity.*

Thanks to the commentary on Virgil written by Servius (fourth century A.D.), we know this simile has a hidden agenda. 'Along plods the black line' is a lost quotation from Virgil's epic ancestor and rival, Ennius, who had used the words in his great poem the *Annals* to describe none other than Hannibal's elephants. Virgil plays on ideas of size and scale to make us appreciate the joke in the allusion: the massive heap of grain, colossal lumps of corn, the narrow file of insects. And the whole line is often given as an example of how the natural spoken stress of the words pushes against the metrical stress, just like the heaving ants.

What's Virgil saying to us about his relationship with Ennius? That his exertions are puny compared with the heroic Punic deeds described by his literary ancestor? Or is there something else more specific going on to do with Roman-Carthaginian relations? Virgil himself invented the relationship between Dido and Aeneas, partly to explain the origins of more recent hostilities between Rome and Carthage (led by the great Roman general Scipio and the elephant-riding Hannibal), so there's just a hint here of a premonition about future wars. And the words connected with these tiny creatures – 'plunder', 'loot' – are the kind you would use to alienate and discredit your enemy as robbers and raiders (Rome and Carthage had fought on a larger scale over the rich grain supply of Sicily). 'Army language', comments Servius. This is just one of the many disenchanting pictures of the hero that spatter the pages of the *Aeneid*. We might remember another hero with robotic associates, Achilles and his Myrmidons, literally the 'ant people', from Greek *myrmex* 'ant', who were once real ants but were transformed into single-minded subordinate soldiers with ant-like qualities.

## Provident creatures

But Virgil's ants have a number of assets the Romans prized, above all foresight and thrift. They remember that winter is coming (unlike Dido and Aeneas, who lived through the winter in an erotic bubble and forgot their duties) and they take a dim view of time-wasting (pointedly, after Aeneas has dawdled with Dido). Dido and Aeneas would be the feckless grasshoppers in Aesop's original fable (though Carthage's industrious citizens had earlier in the poem been compared to busy bees). Thrift is a quality shared with another poetic ant in another simile. She appears in Horace's first *Satire*, building up her own little heap

of corn for the winter, like money-grubbing Romans obsessed with their pension pots:

*Just as the little ant, heroic worker – to take an example – carries in her mouth whatever she can manage and adds it to the pile she's building, with a not unseeing, far from improvident eye on the future. As soon as Aquarius has sobered up the turning year [when January comes], she lies low and wisely makes use of the stores she's put away.*

Horace the satirist quite consciously modelled himself on Aesop, using simple examples from everyday life and the animal world: the satires also feature a goat, a donkey, mice, and even an elephant in the shape of a man called Barrus (a Latin word for elephant). Here Horace seems to apologize for choosing such a tiny example, which might seem unnecessarily modest, until we realize that he's giving us his own etymology of ant, *formica* – from *forma* (model, example) and *mica* (a tiny crumb). Servius on the Virgil passage agrees: *formicae* are so called because they pick up *micae*. Virgil and Horace were friends, and it's quite possible that Virgil borrowed his epic image partly from Horace's little ant. Or that Horace borrowed his image from a minute description of farm pests in Virgil's earlier poem, the *Georgics*, which again plays on ideas of large and small, military and domestic:

*A towering heap of grain is pillaged by the weevil and the ant, concerned about a pinched old age.*

## From ants to cafés?

You might think when you see the modern word 'formica', conjuring up fifties cafés with milk-shakes and juke-boxes, that you can play the etymology game yourself and be pretty sure where the word for that hard plastic material comes from. A speckled surface, perhaps, as if crawling with ants? In fact, 'formica' was coined in 1913 by two manufacturers in Cincinnati (named after the Roman general Cincinnatus, who left his plough to fight for Rome and become her dictator) and means nothing more than 'for mica', in other words a substitute for the naturally shiny substance mica, which does seem to come from Latin, whether from *mica* 'crumb' or from *micare* 'to shine'.

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